

# rewarding the substance detection k-9

BY RANDY HARE





■ **Right:** The handler creates a positive fight at the point of odor.

■ **Below:** A K-9 exhibits alert behavior on the substance, manipulating the handler to deliver the reward with a fight.



## An exploration of the beliefs, traditions, and facts concerning substance-detection training.

**T**he following statements are a few of the standard principles and beliefs that K-9 handlers use while working their dogs.

- Don't let the dog see where the reward is coming from.
- Keep your feet moving when your dog stops to investigate.
- Make the reward *explode* from the source so the dog thinks that it exploded from *within* the source.
- Pre-stim the dog with the reward by acting as though you are hiding the reward.
- Your dog is not really looking for the contraband; he thinks he is looking for his reward.
- Use a contraband-scented reward with your dog.
- Hiding the contraband with the primary reward is the only way to teach substance detection.
- Praise your dog while he is alerting.
- Combine the substance odor with a stuffed toy and encourage the dog to destroy the toy.

Like anyone else handling or training detection dogs, I have heard those statements many times during my 27 years in the dog business. Most K-9 professionals who know me probably will tell you that they met me when I attended one of their seminars or competitions. Many years ago, I adopted a policy of keeping my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut while attending every seminar possible. That policy has served me well as I learned volumes from many fine K-9 professionals. This article plus videos is a new concept that takes advantage of technology by combining the versatility of the Internet with the professional platform of *Police K-9 Magazine*. It is an attempt to express some of the knowledge I have gained — not only by listening to other K-9 professionals, but also by documenting and paying close attention to the dogs themselves.

Throughout the article, I will refer you to a Web site where I have posted narrated video clips. The clips will explain the ideas and philosophies presented here and will make them easier to comprehend. Here's how it

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works: Point your online browser to <http://www.randyhare.com/pk9mag/videolink.htm>. You will find video clips labeled 1 through 7. Viewing the clips will make little sense without reading the article and vice versa. So deploy a computer with a fast Internet connection and view Video No. 1 now. For best results, return to this article immediately afterward.

#### Questioning Traditional Training

I hope that Video No. 1 raised some questions in your mind, such as:

- Why did the dog not pay attention to the balls thrown at him?
- Why did the dog not alert to the box containing the balls that he could both see and smell?
- Why did the dog pay no attention to all the noise the reward made in the distraction box?

This article will explain exactly how the behavior in that footage is possible. The fact that the dogs clearly ignored stimuli that would cause most dogs to exhibit alert behavior was no accident and was carefully planned. Most of these ideas were derived directly from certain aspects of protection training and are fairly easy for an open-minded person to understand.

While attending a police K-9 seminar some years ago, I observed a bite-work training session in which a police service dog (PSD) was back-tied while a trainer (agitator or decoy) attempted to cure the dog from being equipment-oriented, or what some people would refer to as "sleeve happy." I watched as more and more corrections and compulsion were used on this dog as the dog continued to go for the sleeve on the ground instead of the trainer/decoy. At the end of the session,

the dog was totally confused as to what to do and why he was being corrected. After all, the dog was simply trying with all his power to perform a behavior he had been allowed to do over the past several months. The sleeve on the ground had always been a signpost and the sight of the sleeve meant that this aggression game the dog absolutely lived for was about to begin. The bite, the intensity, and all associated behaviors previously had been rewarded by using the sleeve or other equipment.

When asked for my opinion, I replied by asking the trainer how he could justify coming down so hard on this young dog for doing exactly what the dog had been taught to do over the past several months. We dog trainers seldom

take into account that the dog uses every one of his senses to process information that will lead him to obtain his reward successfully. Once we see fit to progress this dog on to the next level, we attempt to force the dog to disbelieve what he sees (the sleeve), hears, and feels. The handler corrected the dog for going for the dead sleeve in an attempt to teach the dog that he should go for the decoy and not the equipment.

The trainer attempted to undo with force what the dog had been taught initially through positive reinforcement and drive.

Traditional training tends to cause us to believe that behavior can be changed or learned through corrections and compulsion, the same way we might deal with another human who crossed us or with a child who misbehaved. We forget sometimes that we are dealing with an animal and, although these animals are capable of achieving amazing feats, they are still animals and never will comprehend the English language or understand what triggers our anger. We are never going to be able to explain to them in our

#### Video Clips for this Article

- VIDEO NO. 1: Distractions: Alex PC and Veto
- VIDEO NO. 2: Rex Using Eyes and Equipment Happy
- VIDEO NO. 3: Steve Under Stimulus Control
- VIDEO NO. 4: Uri Figuring Out the Fight
- VIDEO NO. 5: Newby, On Returning to Fight
- VIDEO NO. 6: Two Handlers Working  
Their Dogs Around a Car
- VIDEO NO. 7: Conclusion



■ **Opposite:** A detection dog trains on a short rack, ignoring balls and other dogs while exhibiting an active alert exactly to the target odor box.

■ **Below:** K-9 Chona offers a passive response at the correct location despite many distractions. The reward was moved closer and closer to the source holes on the box and then seized with a fight once the ball reached the source.

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language why we just corrected them or acted out of unfairness or anger. We are never going to be able to tell them, "I'm sorry." Once something is done, it's done, and they, as animals, are never going to forget it or the circumstances surrounding that incident.

Please view Video No. 2, in which a dog with an equipment fixation was taught a different path to correct behavior within his drive.

### Successfully Changing Behavior

Through a combination of working the dog in Video No. 2 within his drive and manipulating his environment, we were able to allow him to learn that the sight of the sleeve alone was no longer a reliable avenue to success. All we did was change the training environment, allowing the dog to figure out on his own a new and reliable avenue to success.

You might think that I am totally against corrections or compulsion, but I assure you, that's not the case. I am, however, of the opinion that anything a dog can learn on his own is more effective and better understood than what humans can force on the dog. Video No. 2 demonstrates how easily a dog can learn if we keep ourselves as trainers out of the way and manipulate the environment, allowing the dog to decide for himself to do the correct behavior through positive reinforcement. That does not mean I will never use corrections (with the proper touch); what it does mean is that I will have to use only a fraction of the corrections that traditionally would be used. The reason fewer corrections are necessary is because the dog already

knows what is expected of him, and the mechanics of the exercise already have been shaped positively.

Over the years, I have come to realize that an excellent trainer is not one who physically shows the dog what to do; rather, *an excellent trainer is a master of manipulating the dog's environment, allowing the dog to educate himself through his drives and by carefully timed reinforcements.*

We tend to make the same traditional mistakes in detection dog training that we make in protection training. We feel that we somehow need to show the dog what to do. We take the dog up to the hide and tap on it to get the dog to show interest before delivering the reward in a manner that is supposed to make the dog think the reward exploded from within the source. We attach a verbal confirmation, such as "good, good, good" or "get it, get it, get it" while the dog alerts, attaching a cue that the dog may become dependent on. We shove the dope into the reward and throw it enough times that we hope the dog will get the idea to find it. We then wonder why the dog alerts to the presence of his reward. He alerts on his reward because we just taught him to do exactly that, just as we taught him in bite work to be crazy about the sleeve instead of the human.

We use stuffed toys saturated with contraband odor and encourage the dog to destroy the stuffed toy, thinking that we are building the dog's indication. Then we wonder why our dogs are destroying clothing and articles containing human odor when they don't find their human quarry in a building search. We tell the dog when to alert and even correct him into alerting. Gadgets designed and created to fool the dog



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into thinking that the reward is delivered from the odor encourage us to believe that the traditional method of fooling the dog into finding the source of odor is still necessary.

Professional trainers scold handlers for not praising the dog during the dog's alert just before delivering the reward, never taking into consideration that this may become a cue that the dog learns to depend on in later deployments. Trainers tell handlers to keep their feet moving when the dog stops to investigate because they know that this became a cue to the dog during the training and the handler must now compensate for it. Such cues ultimately cause the dog to alert for a variety of different reasons that have nothing to do with target odor. As with the universal reasoning for the bite-work scenario mentioned earlier, that's the way it's always been done, or that's the way I was taught, or this is the way the Europeans do it.

We think it's OK that most of us can talk our dogs into an alert, yet we have so little confidence when our dogs do alert that we refuse to reward them until we are sure that the substance is there. Be honest with yourself, why does that doubt exist? The goal for every detection dog handler and trainer is to increase the likelihood that our dogs will alert to the target odor of substance and decrease the likelihood that they will alert to anything else.

The next clip depicts a dog traditionally trained using such stimuli. Over a three-week training course, our goal was to desensitize this excellent dog to handler and reward cues and have him trust only target odor. Please view Video No. 3 now.

#### **Positive Fight Drive**

Most viewers of Video No. 3 will question my actions in praising the dog for being incorrect or commanding the dog to do his alert behavior away from the target. After all, those practices were used in the dog's training to teach the dog what to do. Absolutely correct. But let's be honest: should the dog alert when you tell him to or when he reaches the target substance? I guess that depends on

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■ **Opposite far left:** A substance detection canine performs an overhead search. **Opposite left:** The handler delivers the reward and stays at the point of odor, creating a positive fight with the reward.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF RANDY HARE

whether there is another way to train without using all the cues from the trainers. Obedience to odor is hard to argue with. Obedience to handlers who may cause the dog to alert without target odor present raises many questions as to credibility and accuracy. During the reward deliveries in Video No. 3, you noticed that the dog had a tendency to stay at the target box, satisfying what I refer to as positive fight drive (PFD). PFD is the recognition by the dog that a preferred toy, object, or sleeve is more attractive when associated with a game, contest, or fight. We see that a lot in protection work when the trainer (agitator or decoy) releases the sleeve to reward the dog, giving the dog the sense that he won the sleeve through an intense bite-and-fight. Suddenly the dog brings the sleeve back to the trainer or the decoy and attempts to instigate another fight. Dogs that have the drives we look for in police work almost always have PFD, and it is a valuable tool if used correctly, especially when it comes to detection work. Please view Video No. 4 now.

Some trainers might refer to PFD as possessiveness. The dog wins the reward and, with every muscle and fiber of his body, exhibits behavior consistent with trying to continue or add a game to the reward. Such behaviors include trying to kill the sleeve by taking it to the ground, pushing with his feet while pulling with his bite, slinging the sleeve back and forth, steadily ripping the threads out of the jute, or holding his reward between his paws and vigorously chewing it. Do you think the dog really is trying to eat the sleeve or reward, or is he trying desperately to keep a game attached to the reward in an effort to satisfy, for as long as he can, his PFD? In Video No. 4, we intended to demonstrate how we could use PFD to educate the dog to release his bite by manipulating the dog's environment, as opposed to using corrections and compulsion. The next clip demonstrates how we can use PFD in detection training. Please view Video No. 5 now.

### Looking Deeper than Tradition

Some years ago, while conducting a High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) seminar, I had a narcotics detection dog handler tell me that the only reason his dog searched for dope was because the dog thought he was searching for his reward. The next handler shared his problem of having to fight physically with his dog every time he attempted to extract the dog's reward. I convinced those two excellent handlers to leave the reward in the dog's mouth and deploy the dog as they normally would during a vehicle check. This next video depicts the actual events of both deployments. Please view Video No. 6 now.

The point that I was trying to make to the two experienced handlers in the video is that the dogs were not as interested in the reward as both handlers initially thought. Instead, the dogs were interested in the game that came with the reward.

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■ Far left: A trained detection dog offers an oral alert to a substance. The dog is manipulating the handler to deliver the reward with a fight at the source. The handler's goal is to deliver the reward in such a manner that it contacts the dog's nose and the substance simultaneously.

Left: For many dogs, the sight of a bite sleeve is a signal that the aggression game the dog lives for is about to begin.



PHOTOGRAPHS: FAR LEFT, COURTESY OF RANDY HARE; LEFT, ACEK9.COM

- The dog knows where the reward is at all times.
- The dog knows what he has to do to obtain that reward.
- The handler's obligation is that he will deliver that reward to the dog at the target substance of odor *with a fight* (encouraging PFD).
- The single most important clue for the dog to make all of that come together is substance odor. The dog has the incredible ability to use his sense of smell to follow the odor to the actual substance. Our job as handlers and trainers becomes a matter of

Unfortunately, one of the only places a dog experiences the game he lives for is when the handler tries to extract the reward from the dog. Why do you think the dog fights so hard to keep that reward? Instead, what we have learned is to recognize this and combine this game with the substance odor source using PFD. The result is that the dog takes the reward back to the substance source of odor, similar to the way the dog takes the sleeve and rams it back into the trainer (decoy or agitator). Does it make sense now why the dog ignores all the balls on the ground except for the one that involves a game (fight)? Is it easier to understand why we can throw balls at some of the dogs while they are searching?

If you consider that the reward in detection training is similar to the sleeve in protection training, it's easier to accept that the dog can ignore the ball and know that the real reward will be delivered only at the point of odor *with a fight*. Likewise, the dog learns in protection training to ignore all sleeves except the one the decoy wears, because that sleeve is the only one that represents the fight. The sleeve, like the ball, is nothing more than a signpost that communicates to the dog the exact task to be performed. The dog learns through PFD that the only time he interacts with the sleeve is when it is on the decoy. The only time the dog interacts with the substance-detection reward is at the point of odor, and then the reward involves the fight that the dog truly desires.

Once that philosophy makes sense to you, then fooling the dog into knowing where the reward is coming from will seem as pointless to you as it does to me. Training becomes straightforward when we as trainers and handlers realize that the fight or game is the true reward. The dog comes to understand that the only place that game of fight will occur is at the target substance. If you consider the contents of this video article, it is easier to acknowledge the following facts.

manipulating the environment where the dog can use target odor to solve the puzzle of finding the substance. By solving that puzzle, the dog manipulates the handler to deliver the reward at the point of odor with a fight and without sleight of hand or trickery.

It's not a matter of fooling the dog into performing his task by acting like we threw the reward, by trying to make the dog think that we do not have the reward, or by employing somebody else to deliver the reward. Whether you believe it or not, your dog already knows you have the reward. Presenting and coaxing the dog to alert on areas where you, the human, believe that the dog should have smelled or alerted to something accomplishes nothing more than to make your dog more obedient and sensitive to handler cues instead of to the goal, which is target odor source. Often we become our own worst enemy when it comes to training and handling substance detection dogs by adopting the principles and beliefs listed at the beginning of this article. The continued belief that the dog must be fooled into performing substance detection suggests that the dog is not smart enough or is incapable of completing this task while knowing exactly where his reward is at all times.

If you use PFD with a capable dog and accept the fact that the dog need not be fooled, it is the dog that will insist that the reward and the substance be combined in his effort to satisfy PFD, as demonstrated in the last video. Please view Video No. 7 now. ■

Randy Hare is the owner and training director of Alpha K-9 Training Center in Jackson, Mississippi, and has been training dogs for 27 years. He was a law-enforcement officer and K-9 handler from 1988 to 1999. He is the author and technical expert of the video series, *On Target, Training Substance Detection Dogs with Randy Hare*. Contact Randy at [www.randyhare.com](http://www.randyhare.com).